Libby spill idea meets opposition

By JIM MANN
The Daily Inter Lake

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers appears to have taken an interest in releasing water over Libby Dam's spillway to boost flows in the Kootenai River, an idea that is already drawing stiff opposition.

In a recent letter to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the Corps raised the idea of adding to peak flows from Libby Dam by releasing 5,000 cubic feet per second over the spillway in spring 2004. Following the guidelines of a 2000 biological opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Corps proposes spilling an additional 5,000 cfs by spring 2007.

Montana officials say the spills would create dissolved gases in the river that would exceed state water quality standards and threaten trout populations just below the dam. While the letter does not expressly request it, exceeding state standards would require approval from the state Department of Environmental Quality.

"That's the direction they are going," said Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Windom. "We are going to lobby very heavily for DEQ to deny that. It's harmful to resident fish. It has an impact on our water quality, it has an impact on our base of recreation on the river, and it opens the door to larger, more prolonged releases in the future."

The Corps letter says that measures have been considered to lessen the impacts of increasing releases, including the possible installation of an additional turbine at Libby Dam. But none of those measures could be implemented by next spring.

Evan Lewis, fisheries biologist with the Seattle District Office of the Corps, said the intent is to comply with the biological opinion. Montana does not have a formal waiver process to exceed water quality standards, as other states do, but the state's approval will be necessary, he said.

"We're looking for some way to reach an agreement with the state, something that they can be comfortable with," Lewis said.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials contend higher flows will benefit the sturgeon population, protected as a threatened species, by scouring out river-bottom cobble in an area where sturgeon are known to spawn downstream near Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

But Montana officials are certain the proposed spills will harm trout and they are not convinced the elevated spring flows will be enough to flush out sediments in the lower river.

Brian Marotz, special fisheries projects manager for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said he believes that much higher flows will be necessary to clean out the river, and he predicted that high flows will be politically unacceptable, particularly for people who live along the lower Kootenai River.

Marotz said he shares concerns about wild sturgeon reproduction in the Kootenai River, which reached peak flows of 62,000 to 70,000 cfs prior to construction of Libby Dam.

Now peak flows are roughly half that volume, but the problem with reproduction cannot be tied exclusively to peak flows, Marotz said.

"We know adults are spawning, even at lower flows, as evidenced by eggs," he said.

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Libby Dam spill proposal all wet, critics say

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The problem appears to lie in the period after adult sturgeon spawn — a time that begins after peak flows, he said. And that partially points to the issue of where fish are spawning rather than how much water is in the river.

If the government cannot pump enough water through the river channel to flush out sediments, he said, then it needs to consider other methods to improve sturgeon reproduction. Suggested measures include modifying the river channel to increase velocities at lower flows, or netting adult salmon and transporting them upstream.

But as far as dam operations are concerned, Marotz favors a multi-species flow regime involving high spring releases without spilling water from the dam, followed by a gradual reduction in releases through the summer into September.

"In most years, there's not enough water to have a big peak and have a gradual declining flow after the peak," he said.

John Hines, one of Montana's members on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, said he too is concerned about the spills.

"The benefit appears to be speculative at best, while our Fish, Wildlife and Parks agency is real convinced of the harm of an extended exposure of fish to dissolved gas levels," he said.

Hines is also concerned about how spilling water will effect water management strategies backed by Montana and recently endorsed by the power and conservation council.

Hines questions whether that water can be provided, given that the federal government also calls on Libby Dam to provide late-summer releases to boost flows in the lower Columbia River system for migrating salmon.

"There's only so much water in a system and if you spill that water early on, it appears you have less water available for summer flow augmentation," he said.

Hines said Montana DEQ officials have assured him that if a waiver to water quality standards were to be considered, the department would hold public hearings.

The push and pull over more water for sturgeon has worked its way into the legal system. The Center for Biological Diversity has sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, calling for increased flows from Libby Dam.

In early summer 2002, unpredicted runoff led to an unscheduled spill at Libby Dam that caused gas-bubble trauma in fish below the dam.

"We didn't have a massive die-off or anything, but gases can have long-term effects," Marotz said. "We're definitely not in favor of a spill exceeding state water quality standards ... because of the important tailwater fishery that is right below the dam."

Marotz speculates Canadian officials will also have concerns about proposals to spill water from Libby Dam, because doing so will change elevations in Lake Koocanusa and Kootenay Lake, both of which extend into Canada.

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